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ABSTRACT

Five articles in this newsletter examine Hmong refugees in the United States, describing how they are faring in various communities around the country, explaining how their experiences in Laos influences their behavior and attitudes, and examining the challenges being faced by the youth. A list is provided that gives a breakdown of the Hmong population in the United States by state. The articles presented include: "No Strangers to Change"; "Hmong Self-Sufficiency: Community Differences"; "Kue Chaw: Leader of the Blue Ridge Hmong"; "Prospects Brighten in Fresno"; and "Young Adults Face Tough Choices." (GLR)

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The Hmong

Donald A. Ranard

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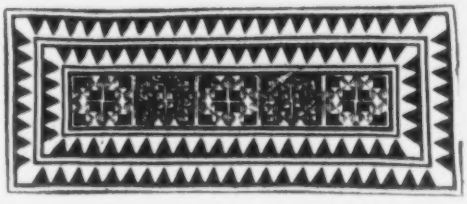
Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

The Hmong



by Donald A. Ranard

The number of Hmong refugees being resettled in the U.S. has increased dramatically in the past two years, again raising concerns about this group's adaptability. Five articles in this issue of In America *take a fresh look at Hmong refugees in the U.S., describing how they are faring in various communities around the country, explaining how their experiences in Laos influence their behavior and attitudes, and examining the challenges being faced by young adults.*

No Strangers to Change

"The most disadvantaged of the Indochinese refugee groups are the . . . Hmong, who have left their remote mountain villages of northern Laos. Like Alice falling down a rabbit hole, they have suddenly found themselves in a strange wonderland where nothing is the same. Their pre-literate society has been dropped into the age of technology."

This excerpt from a newspaper article about Hmong refugees in the U.S. exemplifies a common tendency to portray the Hmong journey to America as a sudden crossing from traditional to modern life—with no intervening exposure to change. But a look at recent Hmong history in Laos shows that the Hmong experience there is far more complex than we are often led to believe. For the Hmong in America, the process of change—and the challenge of adjusting to it—began long before they came here.

"Adaptation to life in America continues the process which has been going on through the lifetimes of the Hmong who are here," writes William Smalley, a linguist with over 20 years involvement with the Hmong.

The journey to America is not the first large-scale migration of the Hmong. Hmong legends tell of migrations from an original homeland to Siberia and from Siberia to China. The Hmong in America are descendents of groups who migrated to Laos in the early part of the 19th century from southern China.

At first, the Hmong in Laos kept to their mountains, avoiding contact as much as possible with the lowland Lao and the French. But after World War II, groups of Hmong traders began to venture into the Lao provincial centers; some eventually moved closer to these towns. Others took up rice farming in the lowlands. During this period, the Hmong began to make more use of Western medicine, administered in Lao hospitals. Lao schools were established in areas near Hmong villages, and some of the most able Hmong students were sent to Lao towns to study. A few went to France.

Establishing a cooperative relationship with the Lao/French government, the Hmong began to participate more in national life and became the only non-Lao ethnic group to have a provincial chief to represent them at the provincial level. In 1954, when the French turned over power to an

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independent Laos, the Hmong were represented in the constitutional convention.

In 1961, Hmong recruits joined the Royal Lao Government's fight against the Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao as soldiers in a CIA-trained and -financed secret army.[1] Their reasons were more practical than ideological: As members of a minority traditionally looked down upon by the ethnic Lao, they hoped that a victory for their side would improve their status in Laos, just as their support for the French/Lao government had brought them political and social advantage a generation before. It was a decision with tragic consequences: 10% of the population was killed; another 30%—about 100,000 people—became refugees in their own land, settling into already existing towns or in resettlement centers built for them. In many of these centers, they became dependent on external aid, including U.S. rice drops—a dependency that for some would last until the end of the war and continue in Thailand and the United States. Thus, many Hmong were refugees in their own country long before they fled to Thailand.

Life in the Laotian resettlement centers brought more contact with the Lao as well as other ethnic groups. In many of the larger settlements, it brought exposure to new forms of technology: guns, planes, helicopters, jeeps, trucks, farming machinery, electronic equipment. The larger settlements had public buildings, including schools, as well as stores run by Lao, Chinese, and Indian merchants.

With a population of over 30,000, Long Cheng—the military center for the secret war—became the biggest Hmong settlement in history and, although it appeared on no maps at the time, it was one of the largest towns in the country. It was a bustling place, a contradictory mixture of the old and the new. Women in traditional dress sewed *pa ndau* outside huts built in the traditional manner, while planes and helicopters landed and took off without pause, and trucks and jeeps and small buses crowded with people crisscrossed the base. Long Cheng offered new opportunities for the resourceful. According to one account, "Some enterprising Hmong built an ice factory at Long Cheng, while others opened restaurants. . . . There were Hmong photographers and Hmong dentists; Hmong became tailors, bakers, cobblers, and radio repairmen. A new cottage industry, the fabrication of brooms, blossomed in the outlying villages giving employment to over 200 Hmong families."

These new settlements required new forms of government, which in turn required new forms of Hmong leadership. Most of the larger resettlement centers were operated by the military, and

Survey Shows Increase in Literacy Rates at Ban Vinai

In a recent paper, "Literacy Acquistion of Hmong Refugees in Thailand," Lynelle Long discusses findings of a 1986 survey conducted in Ban Vinai. The data show:

• 49% of adults at Ban Vinai are literate in one or more languages and 63% of Ban Vinai's school-age children are in Thai primary school.

• About three times more men than women are literate.

• Men are most likely to be literate in Lao, followed by Thai, Hmong, and English. Women are most likely likely to be literate in Hmong, followed by Lao, Thai, and English. The young are learning more French, English, and Chinese than their elders, while the elderly, as a whole, aren't becoming literate in any language.

These choices reflect how different generations view their futures, says Long. Most elderly hope to return to Laos and have therefore made little effort to become literate in any language. Young people, on the other hand, hope to resettle in third countries—hence their interest in French and English. The middle generation—unsure whether to stay in camp or apply for resettlement in a third country—have made choices based on their present situation.

[1]Not all Hmong who fought in Laos sided with the U.S.-backed Royal Lao government. According to one estimate, about 20% fought with the Pathet Lao. Others sought to remain neutral.

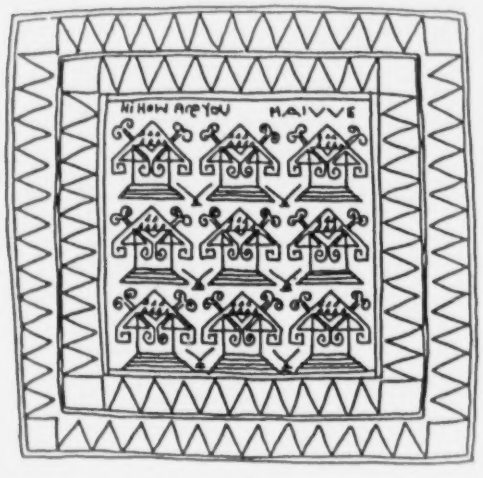
in some of the centers, high-ranking officers became clan leaders. Through their contact with American military personnel, these officers gained knowledge of American culture, language, and institutions. They were also among the first Hmong refugees to flee to Thailand, and because of their close ties to the American military, they were among the first Hmong in Thai refugee camps to be accepted for resettlement to the U.S. Their backgrounds and the timing of their arrival in the U.S. allowed many of them to assume positions of leadership in U.S. Hmong communities.

The emergence of a small group of well-educated Hmong youth during the war years would have a later (though limited) impact on Hmong leadership patterns in the US. According to one estimate, by 1975, there were 600 Hmong students studying at the secondary-school level in Vientiane, the Laotian capital. The Vientiane Hmong students formed their own organization and elected their own leaders. With their knowledge of Western culture, languages, and institutions, these students would later provide a new kind of Hmong leadership in the US.

Life in Thai refugee camps, while similar in many ways to life in the large resettlement centers in Laos, brought two important changes. One was less opportunity for economic independence. Unlike many of the Laotian resettlement centers, Thai camps offer no opportunity for farming and very little opportunity for other forms of employment. One can only guess at the psychological effects of long-term dependence and idleness. "I feel like a tiger in a cage, and they've just opened the door," said one Hmong man who was on his way to the U.S. after 10 years in Ban Vinai. "I'm happy to be free, but I'm afraid I won't survive."

A 1986 survey in Ban Vinai indicated another change brought about by life in the camp: It found that nearly half of the adult population there is literate in one or more languages and well over half of the children are enrolled in Thai primary schools (see box, facing page). This is a significant development. A 1982 survey of refugee families in four U.S. cities showed only 39% of Hmong adults literate in any language, and a 1981 survey of a West Coast Hmong community showed that over 70% of adults had had no schooling in Laos.

The Hmong in America, then, are no strangers to change; indeed, more than a few have been willing partners in the process. "Some people had been swept along by the changing events, without learning to do much more than minimal coping for survival," Smalley writes, "Others had responded to the new situations by learning new skills and adapting creatively to new opportunities." ⊠



Pa ndau: a record of change

This is a drawing of a *pa ndau* square produced by Mai Vue, a Hmong woman in Lansing, Michigan. It combines traditional Hmong patterns, English words, and Laotian symbolism (the three-headed elephant is the symbol of the Royal Lao Government).

Weaving language into *pa ndau* is not new, according to Hmong legend. Hmong stories tell of a time in China when the Hmong had their own kingdom and their own written language. According to legend, the Chinese threatened to execute anyone who used the Hmong language, so Hmong women tried to keep the script alive by weaving it into *pa ndau* patterns.

Hmong Self-Sufficiency:

IT is said that whenever two middle-aged Hmong men get together in Minneapolis/St. Paul, where most of the Hmong are on welfare, the talk tends to shift back and forth between two topics: what they used to do in Laos and what they plan to do when they go back. When the Hmong get together in Dallas, where everyone works and over half have bought their own homes, they talk about their salaries, their houses, and their children's education.

Just as the Hmong experience in Laos is more complex than we are often lead to believe, so the Hmong experience in the U.S. is more varied than most accounts indicate. A 1985 government-commissioned report on Hmong resettlement offered as "one of its most important findings . . . the variability of Hmong resettlement among different locales."

Today, over 100,000 Hmong live in over 70 communities in 30 states, according to a new survey funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). While a majority of the Hmong in the U.S. still depend on welfare, a growing number of small Hmong communities are becoming self-sufficient. There are now 33 Hmong communities in the U.S. with employment rates of 80% or more.

What accounts for these differences? Why are some Hmong communities thriving while others appear to be mired in a cycle of welfare dependency?

According to Toyo Biddle, a Hmong resettlement specialist at

Community Differences

the Office of Refugee Resettlement, three factors account for a large part of the difference: local economic conditions, the size of the Hmong community, and the resettlement philosophy of Hmong leadership.

Local economies make a difference

One factor is the type of jobs available in a given locale. In areas of high Hmong employment, refugees are able to get jobs that provide health benefits and wage levels that enable their families to support themselves.

The job markets in Dallas, Atlanta, and Providence, for example, are such that even the most disadvantaged Hmong—those lacking previous education or English skills—can find an entry-level factory job as an assembler or machine operator. Typically, these jobs start somewhat above the minimum wage (usually around $5 per hour), require no previous training, and offer full medical coverage.

In contrast, the economy in Fresno resembles what some labor specialists are predicting for the U.S. economy as a whole: a two-tiered workforce made up of high-paying white collar jobs and dead-end minimum wage service jobs. Most Hmong don't qualify for the first type of job and can't support their families with the second.

Since a Hmong community can be self-sufficient only if its numbers don't exceed the supply of available jobs, community size is also an important factor. Self-sufficient Hmong communities have been able to regulate the flow of Hmong newcomers in proportion to economic opportunities.

U.S. Hmong Population, by State

Summer 1988

California	58,976
Wisconsin	16,456
Minnesota	13,700
Michigan	2,610
Rhode Island	2,178
Colorado	1,300
Washington	1,182
Oregon	1,130
Georgia	823
North Carolina	818
Pennsylvania	750
Illinois	702
Kansas	600
Massachusetts	525
Ohio	455
Iowa	403
Texas	395
Montana	390
Nebraska	366
Connecticut	300
New York	300
Oklahoma	300
Utah	168
Tennessee	105
South Carolina	84
New Jersey	70
Indiana	65
Arkansas	46
Virginia	34
South Dakota	22

Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement

The extent to which an area offers jobs for women is a critical measure of a community's economic independence: Without a second income, most large Hmong families can't become self-sufficient. Thus, areas with a high rate of Hmong employment tend to offer the kinds of jobs (most commonly, industrial sewing and electronics assembly) for which Hmong women are qualified.

A second job adds needed income for a family but creates a problem: Who takes care of the children? In self-sufficient communities, working Hmong couples with young children but without an older relative at home typically work different shifts—a strategy most appear to favor over child care. In Dallas, Atlanta, and Morganton, split shift work is common; in Fresno and Minneapolis/St. Paul, it hardly exists. Thus, the availability of split shift work is an important factor.

Areas with high rates of Hmong employment are characterized by a relatively low cost of housing. Researchers have discussed the mismatch between the housing needs of Southeast Asian refugees, with their large families, and an American rental market affected by trends toward a shrinking U.S. household size. The housing problem is especially serious for the Hmong, whose families tend to be larger than those of other refugee groups. In Minneapolis/St. Paul, for example, the shortage of low-cost rental housing outside of government-subsidized housing hinders the transition from welfare to self-sufficiency. In contrast, the availability of low-cost housing in Providence is a factor in the economic progress of the Hmong there. In Atlanta, Dallas, and Morganton, low housing costs have allowed a majority of the Hmong to buy their own houses.

The role of leadership

Many Hmong communities (and all large Hmong communities) have three kinds of leaders: traditional, kin-based leaders, military leaders who emerged during the war years, and community leaders elected to represent the Hmong community to the American public. The extent to which *all* levels of leadership in a Hmong community support the goal of self-sufficiency is an important factor in a community's economic success. In some areas, the influence of younger community leaders has been undermined by older, more powerful clan and former military leaders, some of whom see successful resettlement as secondary—even detrimental—to the dream of returning to Laos.

The best example that a Hmong leader can provide is to work himself, says Toyo Biddle, who points out that one reason the Hmong community in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, has a higher rate of self-sufficiency than other communities in the state is that the Hmong leaders in Sheboygan are working, and thus serve as role models for their people.

Jer Thao, a Hmong leader in Atlanta, agrees. "If the leader works, people will try to follow his example," he says. ⊠

Kue Chaw: Leader

IT took Kue Chaw a year to find a house with the right combination of lucky signs. Like many Hmong, Kue Chaw believes that the site of a house confers good or bad luck on the occupants. It's a complicated science—if the terrain resembles an elephant, for example, then the house should sit between the tusks—but the main thing is to have a clear view of the mountains. By this measure, Kue Chaw's house, with its sweeping view of the Blue Ridge mountains, is very lucky.

Determination, rather than luck, explains the remarkable success of Kue Chaw and the 40 Hmong families who have carved out a home for themselves in this rural North Carolina county where few immigrants have settled since the Carsons, Englishes, McDowells, and Pattons arrived from the British Isles in the 1700s.

Kue Chaw first came to the area in 1978 on the last leg of a three week car trip around the U.S. One morning, after three years in Philadelphia, Kue Chaw had packed up his 1977 Chevrolet and set out to see what else America had to offer.

"I had a good job in Philadelphia," says Kue Chaw, who was working as an outreach worker at the time. "But I couldn't get used to the crowds, the noise, the pollution, the fast way of

life." And he worried about his 10 children, he adds, recalling with shock the first time he visited a high school classroom in Philadelphia. Students sat with their feet propped up on their desks, talking to each other, ignoring the teacher—or, worse, talking back. Will my children be like that? he wondered.

The trip took him to nearly every Hmong community in the U.S. He wasn't encouraged by what he saw: Many of the Hmong he visited were on welfare, living in run-down buildings in bad neighborhoods. They seemed to spend more time talking about their lives in Laos and what they were going to do when they went back than in planning for their future in America.

of the Blue Ridge Hmong

Despite all the evidence that the Hmong couldn't adjust to America, Kue Chaw believed otherwise. The Hmong were a tough people. They could adjust—prosper, even. They just needed the right place with the right kind of leadership.

To Kue Chaw, McDowell County seemed like a good place to start. The area had already become home to a small community of Hmong, sponsored there by a local Baptist church. The mountains and the rolling foothills and the valleys filled with streams reminded Kue Chaw of Laos. Land and housing were inexpensive, and there were plenty of jobs in furniture, textile, and pharmaceutical factories. The people were friendly in a reserved way: They had a way of giving a stranger the benefit of the doubt while they sized him up.

Today, ten years after he first passed through the area, Kue Chaw is the leader of what has become one of the most prosperous Hmong communities in the U.S. Most of the 400 Hmong in the area own their own houses and land where they grow vegetables and raise chicken and turkeys. A few—Kue Chaw among them—have grown rice. Everyone works—mostly at the factories. Local reaction to the Hmong has been largely favorable; initial opposition to the Hmong from some parts of the conservative, largely white community died down as people came to realize that the mountain people from Laos shared many of their values—family, hard work, a preference for the rural life.

Kue Chaw shows no sign of slowing down. He spends most of his time helping the steady trickle of newcomers, many of whom come to the area as part of the ORR-funded planned secondary resettlement project, which helps refugees relocate from areas of high welfare dependency to communities that offer favorable prospects for employment.

When he visits other areas, Kue Chaw finds more and more people interested in his message of self-help. Some still talk about about going back to Laos, but when they do Kue Chaw has an answer. "I tell them that first we must work hard and give our children a good education," he says. "If some day the situation in Laos changes and we can go back, let's go back as teachers, engineers, nurses, doctors, businessmen." He is standing in the back yard between his three-bedroom brick rambler and a small, white frame building where meals are prepared. The Hmong don't like to cook where they live, Kue Chaw has explained, because of the smell and the smoke, and in Laos, families who could afford it built a separate "cooking house." Behind the frame house, there is a vegetable garden and a chicken coop. The land also accommodates a third house and two trailers belonging to relatives. Against the mountain backdrop, their homestead looks more than a little like a small Hmong village in the highlands of Laos.

"But I don't want to go back to fight," says the former army captain. "The Hmong have fought enough." ⊠

FRESNO officials say that one morning they woke up and discovered they had become host to the biggest Hmong community in America. They aren't exaggerating by much. In mid 1981, there were almost no Hmong in Fresno, a city of 280,000 in California's Central Valley. Two years later, 12,000 Hmong had settled there, almost entirely through secondary migration.

Some were drawn by prospects of farming. Others came for the warm climate, the low rents, and California's generous welfare system. As the size of the community grew, many more simply came to be with family members.

Prospects Brighten in Fresno

The influx overwhelmed social service agencies, forced 10 elementary schools into year-round sessions, and created instant Hmong ghettos in two low-rent neighborhoods.

They couldn't have come at a worse time: an economic recession hit in 1982 with particularly brutal force in Fresno, shutting down factories—virtually the only source of decent paying jobs for Fresno's large blue collar workforce—driving unemployment rates up to twice the national average. By 1985, nine out of ten Hmong in Fresno were on welfare, but still they came, drawn by the magnet of family reunification and the desire to live in a large Hmong community.

"The person who solves the problem of Fresno will be declared a genius," said a refugee official in Washington.

But now, at a time when you'd least expect it, the situation in Fresno seems to be improving. At a time when the Hmong population there is 23,000 and growing fast, the welfare rate is dropping, according to Ernest Velasquez of the Fresno county social services department. The drop is not dramatic, but it is significant: from over 80% in 1987 to a current rate of 67%.

One reason, according to local service providers, is the 2 1/2-year-old GAIN program, a job training and placement program that is mandatory for welfare-dependent refugees who have been in the U.S. for two years or more. As a result of GAIN, more refugees are being placed in jobs right away, and a small but increasing number of graduates from GAIN-funded language and job training are finding employment as well.

The special waiver in Fresno County of the controversial "100 hour rule" has also helped, county officials say. According to the rule, a welfare recipient who worked 100 hours or more a month lost all of his cash assistance and his medical benefits. In 1986, California exempted refugee families from the rule, but the exemption lasted only for a family's first three years in the U.S. Because of the time limit on the waiver, "Refugees didn't want to work when they knew at some point down the road they were going to lose their benefits," says Velasquez. In 1987, a special pilot project in Fresno exempted *all* families on welfare from the rule. As a result, more refugees are willing to make the transition from the welfare rolls to the payroll, Velasquez says.

A third reason for the change is demographic: an increasing number of young people in Fresno are turning 18 and leaving the welfare rolls. Under California law, individuals 18 or over are ineligible to receive welfare benefits as dependents of an adult on welfare. A small minority of young adults are getting married, having children, and rejoining the welfare rolls, county officials say, but most are either getting full-time jobs or going to school and working part-time.

Efforts to expand services to the Hmong have also helped. It has taken a while. "Limited social services" was how a federally-funded study described the situation in 1983, and two years later, conditions had improved only slightly. The Hmong are the latest in a long succession of immigrants to Fresno: The area has over 70 ethnic groups, and almost everyone there, it seems, has some hard-scrabble immigrant story to tell. This ethnic diversity explains the remarkable tolerance and patience shown towards the Hmong and their troubles—in most other places, there would have been a backlash, given the economic problems and the size and suddenness of the Hmong influx. It also explains why service providers have had a hard time convincing the county government that the Hmong had needs that made them different from other groups in Fresno.

Today that situation is changing. As part of a series of recent county initiatives, 40 Indochinese refugees have been trained to work in county agencies as social workers, health and mental health paraprofessionals, and community outreach workers, and a program at the department of parks and recreation provides services in neighborhood community centers for home-bound refugees. With a staff of 25 part time employees, including 21 Indochinese, the Community Outreach Program Extension (COPE) provides information and referral services and after-school recreation programs for children in five neighborhood sites. In two of the sites, tenant landlord groups have been organized to deal with housing problems. Other agencies use the sites for ESL classes, health clinics, services for the elderly, citizenship classes, family counseling, and consumer/home management counseling. In addition to these efforts, funded mostly by local tax money, the federal government is funding a new orientation program for Hmong newcomers.

In the end, prospects for the Hmong in Fresno will depend to a large extent on whether the city can revive Fresno's sluggish economy. While unemployment in Fresno remains high, local officials say they can glimpse the beginning of a light at the end of the tunnel: more and more companies in Southern California, with escalating rents and wages and a labor shortage caused by the government's crackdown on undocumented aliens, are turning their attention to Fresno, where the rents and wages are low and unemployment is high.

"We don't want the minimum wage, no benefits, sweat shop jobs," says John Quiring of the Fresno County Economic Development Corporation. "We want jobs that start in the five- to six-dollar-an-hour range and offer medical coverage."

What kind of training will these jobs require? "Employers tell us not to worry about technical training," says Quiring, "They say to just give them intensive English, some basic math, and orientation to the workplace."

All of these changes point to a better future for the Hmong in Fresno. "There is no question in our minds that sooner or later the Hmong will be assets to the community," says Ernest Velasquez, "They just need some time and help." ⚄

Hard Work Pays Off for Hmong Businessman

A small but growing number of Hmong in Fresno have started their own businesses. Cha Yang, the 38-year-old owner of the Hmong Mini-Mart gocery store in Fresno, talks about his experiences:

"I came to the U.S. in 1978. The first place I lived was Las Vegas. I didn't like it there. It was too hot, and I didn't like the gambling—not a good place to raise kids. But the main reason I left was they didn't have a good GED program there. I had seven years of education in Laos, and my first goal in this country was to get my GED. I wrote to my cousin in Long Beach [a town in southern California] and asked him about the GED program there. He wrote back and said that Long Beach had a good program, so five months later we moved there. I studied ESL eight hours a day and GED four hours every night. After about a year, I got my GED.

In 1980, I got a job as a community worker. I liked Long Beach—the weather was good and I liked my job. But I wanted to be independent: I figured out that if you work for someone else your opportunity is limited. So in 1982, I decided to start my own business.

I didn't know anything about running a business, so I talked to a friend of mine, a Vietnamese businessman. He said, 'Are you ready to work 12 to 16 hours a day?' I said, 'Yes, no problem, I'm not afraid of hard work.' Next thing, I got a book, 'How to Start a Small Business,' and studied it.

Long Beach didn't have many Hmong, so I decided to open my business in Fresno. Also, rent was cheaper. I borrowed $35,000 from my relatives in Long Beach and in 1982 I opened my store. This year I paid off the loan.

The most important thing about business is, you have to work hard. I work 12 hours a day, seven days a week. And you need patience—it takes a long time before you make a profit. Even now, I don't take home that much, but I'm independent, and that's what I like."

Young Adults Face Tough Choices

PA FOUA was a straight-A junior high school student in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, when she was kidnapped in 1981 by an older Hmong boy from another state. A girl who did so well in school would make a good wife, he thought. But her mother had different plans for Pa Foua and managed to get her back before the marriage took place. Today, seven years later, Pa Foua is a 19-year-old scholarship student at Mt. Holyoke College, a prestigious women's college in South Hadley, Massachusetts. She is majoring in anthropology and biology, with the intention of becoming the first Hmong woman doctor in America.

Interviews with researchers, educators, and Hmong leaders indicate that Pa Foua's high school record, while better than those of most other Hmong, is not so unusual. Hmong high school students are doing surprisingly well, they say. But Pa Foua's success in college makes her a member of a disproportionately small elite of Hmong students, and an even smaller elite of Hmong girls who have managed to make the transition from high school to college.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of a recent study of Southeast Asian youth in San Diego, California is the academic achievement of Hmong secondary school students. The study found that the Hmong in San Diego are earning better grades than most other ethnic groups, including native-born Americans. Among Indochinese, they ranked third after Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese. In addition to their high grades, the Hmong showed good school attendance, the lowest school dropout rate in the city, high math scores on a national standardized test, and a low rate of delinquency.

San Diego State University sociologist Ruben Rumbaut, who co-authored the study with his colleague Kenji Ima, calls the findings "remarkable," given the high poverty rates and low educational levels of Hmong parents and the generally accepted link between students' school performances and their parents' levels of income and education.

Although the study found that the Hmong are among those most likely to succeed in high school, it also discovered that they are among those *least* likely to continue their education beyond high school.[2]

"The study shows that the talent and the motivation are there, but after high school, the Hmong hit a wall," says Rumbaut.

One reason is economic. As one of the poorest ethnic groups in America, the Hmong are less able than others to support their children's education beyond high school. For a Hmong family on welfare, a child's loss of welfare eligibility at 18 further increases the economic burden and decreases the likelihood of further study.

But a bigger source of their difficulties, says Rumbaut, is the same source of their achievements: Hmong culture itself. Traditionally, the authority of Hmong parents is absolute, a trait that produces hard-working, obedient students who thrive in the structured setting of high school but who, after graduation, often flounder when faced with the bewildering array of choices that no previous generation of Hmong ever had to make.

Many Hmong young adults retreat from these uncharted waters to a traditional way of establishing status: getting married and having children.

"In Hmong culture, a boy is not a man until he has a wife and children," says a recently married Hmong teenager in Fresno. Pressure to marry early also comes from grandparents who say they want to have great-grandchildren before they die.

[2]The percentage of Hmong attending college is increasing, however. An ORR-funded survey estimated that in 1982 about 350 Hmong students—less than 5% of the 18- to 24-year-old population—were attending college. A recent ORR-funded survey puts the number of Hmong students in postsecondary schools at about 2,000—approximately 6% of the current 18- to 24-year-old population. The college participation rate among that age group in the U.S. population as a whole is about 32%.

Girls, who traditionally derive *all* their status from marriage and motherhood, feel the marriage pressure earlier than boys.

"If a girl is 18, many boys think she's too old to get married," says a 17-year-old single Hmong mother in Providence. "I didn't want to get married so early, but I was afraid that if I said no to my boyfriend, he would find someone else." She adds bitterly, "So I got married and he found someone else." She later mentions another reason why many girls choose marriage over college: "Many Hmong boys don't like a girl with too much education. They think they can't control them."

Early Marriage and U.S. Law

"[Hmong] early marriage presents some tricky legal issues. In Minnesota [and in many states], sexual relations between an older man and an underage girl are considered statutory rape. Some workers involved in refugee resettlement believe that Hmong culture and the Hmong view that a girl is an adult at puberty should be respected, but others hesitate to make allowances. Al Zdazil, assistant county attorney for Ramsey County [Minnesota] Attorney's office says, 'If we believe in this society that girls the age of 12 are not capable of making appropriate decisions about their sexuality . . . then if we say that we will protect white girls, black girls, Hispanic girls, and Indian girls but we won't protect Hmong girls, aren't we really saying to Hmong girls that because of their race we will not afford them the protection of our laws? And isn't that racism?' "

—Twin Cities Reader

The tendency of girls to marry young puts pressure in turn on the boys not to wait too long, says Ruth Hammond, an ESL teacher and journalist who has written about the Hmong community in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

"A Hmong man who waits until his middle or late 20's to marry might well be deemed too old by eligible girls in their teens," she writes in a recent article examining the problems of Hmong youth in Minneapolis/St. Paul. "And there would be few unmarried women of his own age to choose from."

The patriarchal nature of traditional Hmong culture also puts the educational future of girls at a serious disadvantage. In Hmong families, girls are "devalued," says Rumbaut, primarily because when a Hmong girl gets married, she leaves her own family and clan and joins her husband's. Thus, any investment in a daughter's education is seen as benefitting her future husband's clan and family rather than her own.

In many cases, however, it is the lack of emotional rather than financial support at home that drives girls into early marriage. Rumbaut cites the example of a San Diego Hmong girl who lived with her father and grandparents. Her mother had died in the refugee camps, and throughout high school, she had taken care of the family, doing all the cooking and cleaning. Even so, she managed a B+ average in her classes and a near-perfect score on the verbal section of her college entrance exams. After she won a scholarship to San Diego University, the family agreed to let her go to college, as long as she continued to do the housework at home *and* get a part-time job to make up for the income lost when she turned 18 and became ineligible for welfare.

One day during the summer before she was to begin college, she met a Hmong boy from Merced, a small town near Fresno. Three days later they eloped to Merced and got married.

"The next time I talked to her, I asked her why she did it," Rumbaut says. "She said that part of the reason was financial, but a bigger reason was emotional. She said that not once in all those years of getting up every morning at five o'clock and cooking and cleaning for the family had anyone ever thanked her for what she had done." ⊠

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In America

Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

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